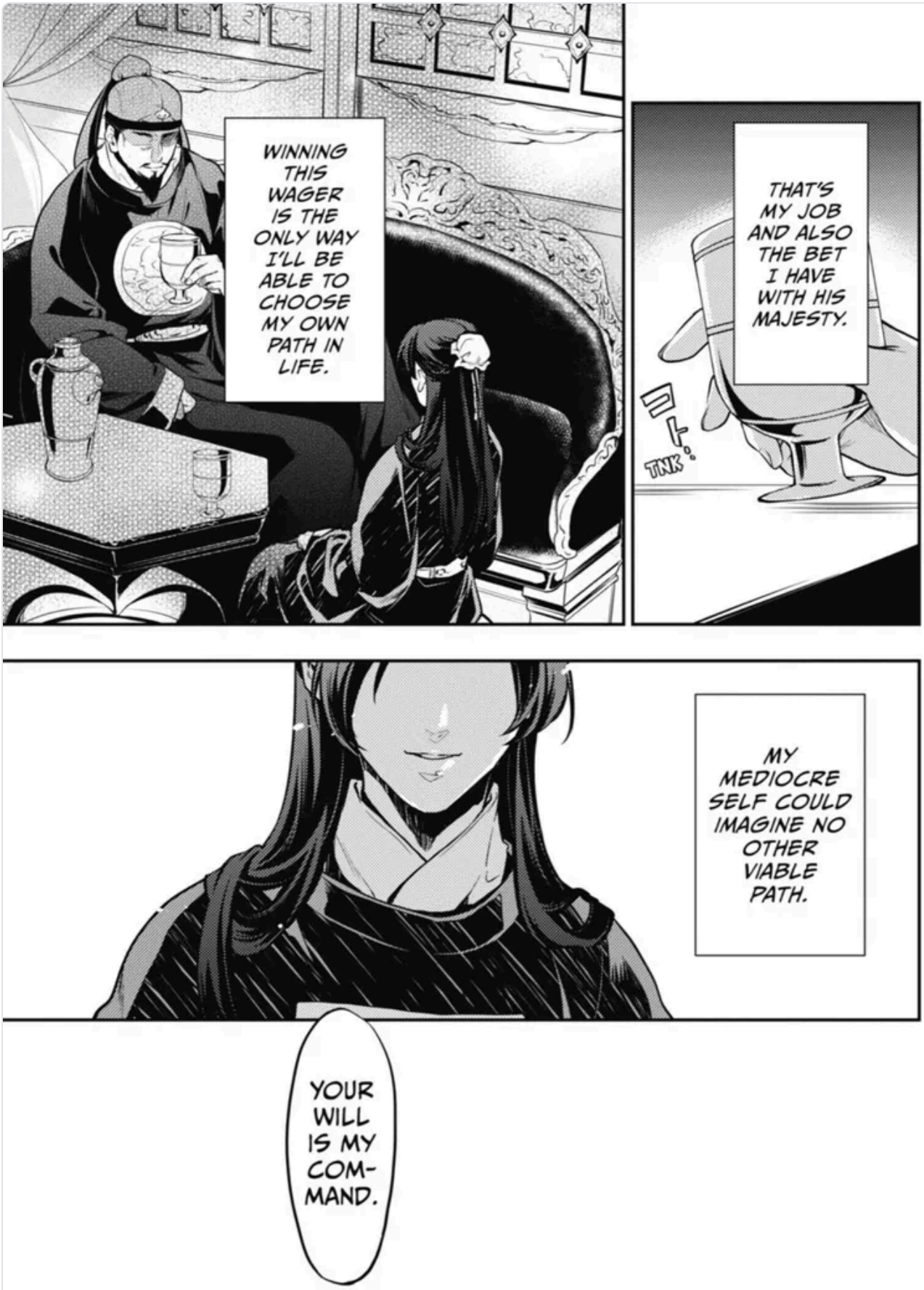
Chapter 24

ARE YOU SERI-OUS?
GLUG GLUG
WELL, WHAT WILL YOU DO?
THE GARDENER MAINTAINING OUR GARDEN...
...IS NONE OTHER THAN YOU, HM?
I DON'T LIKE THIS.

I KNOW ...
...I'M NOTHING MORE THAN A PUPPET IN THE HANDS OF THE EMPEROR.
NO MATTER HOW HARD I TRIED...
...I COULD NEVER EXCEL IN INTELLECT OR THE ART OF WAR.
SO I GUESS I'LL JUST CONTINUE TO PLAY MY PART FOR HIM.
IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN HARD TO OBTAIN WHAT I TRULY DESIRE.
A FINE FACE AND FIGURE... THIS SULTRY VOICE AND GAZE...
I'VE BEEN BLESSED IN THIS REGARD FAR MORE THAN ANY MAN OUGHT TO BE. BUT I SHALL USE THESE GIFTS...
...TO GRANT THE EMPEROR'S RIDICULOUS WISHES.
IN LOOKS ALONE CAN I CLAIM TO SURPASS ANYONE.


WINNING THIS WAGER IS THE ONLY WAY I'LL BE ABLE TO CHOOSE MY OWN PATH IN LIFE.
THAT'S MY JOB AND ALSO THE BET I HAVE WITH HIS MAJESTY.
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TNK。
MY MEDIOCRE SELF COULD IMAGINE NO OTHER VIABLE PATH.
YOUR WILL IS MY COM-MAND.

Chapter 24 The Smoking-Pipe

...AND THERE ARE DAYS LIKE TODAY WHERE HE STAYS COOPED UP IN HIS OFFICE.
SOMETIMES HE DOESN'T COME HOME...
JINSHI IS FAR BUSIER THAN I'D THOUGHT.
I'D ASSUMED ALL HIS WORK INVOLVED THE INNER COURT SINCE HE'S A EUNUCH...
...BUT I HEAR HE HAS DUTIES TO SEE TO IN THE OUTER COURT AS WELL.
...THE FATE OF THESE SHEETS WAS TO BE BURNED.
HOWEVER WORTHLESS THE LAW PROPOSALS WRITTEN ON THEM...
I COULD PROBABLY EARN SOME EXTRA MONEY BY SELLING THESE.
FLAP
THIS IS SUCH GOOD QUALITY PAPER. WHAT A WASTE.

FWAP
THE BURN PIT FOR TRASH...
...IS NEAR THE MILITARY TRAINING GROUNDS AND SOME STOREHOUSES, SO I'M NOT EXACTLY LOOKING FORWARD TO IT...
...BUT I GUESS THIS IS PART OF MY JOB TOO.
THAT'S GAO SHUN FOR YOU, ALWAYS ATTENTIVE TO A WOMAN'S NEEDS.
IT'S SO UNFORTUNATE THAT HE WAS MADE INTO A EUNUCH.
THANK YOU.
PLEASE WEAR THIS...
...SINCE IT'S COLDEST AT THIS TIME OF YEAR.
...IT'S LINED WITH COTTON.

SWEAT
SWEAT
SWEAT
?

I WONDER IF HE NEEDS PERMISSION TO EVEN GIVE A MAID A LINED CLOAK.
MUST BE TOUGH GETTING ANYTHING DONE.

XIAO-MAO...
I SIMPLY GAVE IT TO YOU.
THIS IS ACTUALLY FROM SIR JINSHI.
OH, YOU DON'T SAY?

BOW
ペコっ
THANK YOU, SIR JINSHI.

EVEN THOUGH THE OUTER COURT IS SEVERAL TIMES BIGGER THAN THE INNER COURT...
...THE FLORA HERE IS SPARSE.
I'VE ONLY FOUND COMMON PLANTS, LIKE DANDELIONS AND MUGWORT.
OH, AND RED SPIDER LILIES TOO.
DEEPLY
しみ
じみ
MOVED
IF YOU FAIL TO LEACH OUT THE POISON, THE RESULTING STOMACHACHE WILL MAKE YOU WISH YOU'D NEVER BEEN BORN...
...BUT THE BULBS ARE TASTY ONCE THEY'VE BEEN SOAKED IN WATER.
THE OLD MADAM AT VERDIGRIS WOULD CHEW ME OUT ALL THE TIME...
...FOR INTENTIONALLY EATING SUCH THINGS.
FINDING THINGS TO HARVEST IN WINTER IS HARD AS IT IS...
I DOUBT THERE'S MUCH MORE TO BE HAD.
I GUESS I SHOULD SOW SOME SEEDS AROUND HERE TOO.

THE MADAM TOLD ME HE DROPS BY THE BROTHEL ON THE REGULAR TO HAVE TEA WITH THE GIRLS IN TRAINING.
HE MUST BE WORKING HARD.
OH! IT'S LI HAKU.
HIS BELT IS A DIFFERENT COLOR NOW.
THAT MUST MEAN HE GOT A PROMOTION.
HIS TRUE AFFECTIONS LIE WITH PAILING. BUT TO ENJOY HER COMPANY ...
...IT WOULD COST HALF A YEAR'S EARNINGS FOR A COMMONER.
POOR GUY. THERE'S NO GOING BACK AFTER THAT TASTE OF HEAVEN.
I HEAR HE TRIES TO CATCH GLIMPSES OF HER DIVINE FORM FROM THE GAPS IN THE BROTHEL CURTAINS.

HIYA, LI'L LADY!
YOU'RE ACTUALLY OUTSIDE THE INNER COURT? THAT'S A SURPRISE.
ARE YOU ACCOMPANYING THE CONSORT TODAY?
OH...
I GUESS HE HASN'T HEARD THAT I'VE BEEN LET GO FROM MY DUTIES AT THE INNER COURT.
MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE I WASN'T BACK HOME VERY LONG...
...THAT I NEVER RAN INTO HIM AROUND THE PLEASURE DISTRICT.
I NOW WORK AS A PERSONAL ATTENDANT TO A CERTAIN INDIVIDUAL INSTEAD.
YOU'RE AN ATTENDANT?
WHAT KIND OF ECCENTRIC WOULD HIRE YOU FOR THAT?
HE... ... REALLY IS AN ECCENTRIC, ISN'T HE?
I KNOW IT'S QUITE RUDE, BUT HIS REACTION IS NATURAL.
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JINSHI TOLD ME TO KEEP THE FRECKLES ON MY FACE AFTER I BECAME HIS ATTENDANT.
I STILL HAVE NO IDEA WHAT GOES THROUGH HIS HEAD.
?
THAT REMINDS ME! I HEARD THAT A TOP OFFICIAL RECENTLY BOUGHT OUT THE CONTRACT OF ONE OF THE VERDIGRIS COURTE-SANS.
I HAVE A FRIEND WHO SAW IT WITH HIS OWN EYES!
HUH?
OHHH ...
AFTER THE CON-TRACT HAD BEEN SIGNED ...
...MY SISTERS WENT OUT OF THEIR WAY TO COMPLETELY TRANSFORM ME ON THE GRAND OCCASION OF MY DE-PARTURE.
I'M SURE I DIDN'T LOOK ANYTHING LIKE A NEW MAID.
I THINK I HEARD ABOUT THAT TOO.
TOO MUCH OF A HASSLE TO EXPLAIN WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

ANYWAY, IT SEEMS YOU WERE IN THE MIDDLE OF SOME-THING.
IS EVERY-THING ALL RIGHT?
HUH?
OH, THAT.
THERE WAS A SMALL FIRE, WHICH ISN'T ALL THAT UNUSUAL FOR THIS SEASON.
SO THAT'S IT.
WAS ANY-ONE HURT?
WE KINDA CAN'T FIGURE OUT THE SOURCE OF THE FIRE.
THIS SEEMS LIKE THE KIND OF THING HE COULD'VE JUST LEFT TO ONE OF HIS UNDER-LINGS.
SO THAT'S WHY YOU'RE HERE?
UH-HUH.
HEY, YOU SHOULDN'T GET TOO CLOSE TO IT.
HUH?
JUST THE STORE-KEEP. IT WASN'T SERIOUS, B—

HMM.
IT'S FORTUNATE THAT THE FIRE DIDN'T SPREAD TO THE SURROUNDING CONSTRUC-TIONS.
THE WALLS OF THE BUILD-INGS AROUND HERE ARE ALL MADE OF PLASTER.
IT'S A STORE-HOUSE A LITTLE REMOVED FROM THE ROW OF OFFICE BUILD-INGS.
...THAT THIS WAS NO SMALL BLAZE ...
...AND THOSE SOOT STAINS ON THE NEIGH-BORING BUILDING TELL ME...
THIS SCAT-TERED DEBRIS FROM THE BUILDING THAT CAUGHT FIRE...

GASP
IT'S VERY LUCKY THAT ONLY THE STOREKEEP WAS HURT.
SO THE REASON LI HAKU'S HERE IN SPITE OF IT BEING AN ALLEGEDLY SMALL FIRE...
I SEE.
...BUT PROBABLY MORE LIKE AN EXPLOSION.
...BECAUSE THEY SUSPECT ARSON.
...MUST BE...
...BUT OF COURSE, NOT EVERYONE IS HAPPY.
THIS COUNTRY IS BY AND LARGE A PEACEFUL PLACE...
...THESE ARE STILL PALACE GROUNDS.
PUTTING ASIDE FOR A MOMENT THAT IT WAS A STOREHOUSE WHICH BURNED DOWN...
72

...AND PEACE WITH OTHER NATIONS IS A FRAGILE THING. THERE'S NO TELLING WHEN PEACE MIGHT BECOME WAR.
EVEN IN FOREIGN LANDS, THERE ARE SURELY DIS-SATISFIED INDIVIDUALS LOOKING TO BETTER THEIR LOT IN LIFE.
THOUGH IT'S RARE, ATTACKS FROM ROAMING BANDS AND TRIBES DO OCCUR. DROUGHT AND FAMINE ARE REALITIES TOO...
HIS MAJESTY PASSED A MERE FIVE YEARS AGO...
...LEAVING LOCAL FARMERS WITH A DEARTH OF POTENTIAL WIVES.
THEN THERE'S THE RATHER EGREGIOUS ISSUE OF THE FORMER EMPEROR ANNUALLY TAKING WOMEN FROM RURAL VILLAGES FOR HIMSELF...
...AND THERE ARE STILL MANY WHO REMEMBER HIS REIGN.
THE NUMBER OF MERCHANTS WHO MADE THEIR MONEY SELLING SERVANTS WERE NOT FEW IN NUMBER.
...IS THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVERY SYSTEM OF SERVITUDE, WHICH OCCURRED WHEN THE CURRENT EMPEROR ASCENDED THE THRONE.
ANOTHER RELA-TIVELY RECENT DEVELOP-MENT...

GRAB
CHAR-COAL ...?
WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?
I TOLD YOU NOT TO GET NEAR IT.
A CHARRED POTATO? WHAT A WASTE.
HEY!
SWISH
I'D JUST LIKE TO GET A CLOSER LOOK.
74

GLINT
WHICH MUST MEAN THAT THIS WAS A FOOD STORE-HOUSE.
I WONDER IF THERE'S ANYTHING ELSE AROUND HERE...
DON'T JUST GO TRAIPSING AROUND IN HERE!
IVORY?
MUST BE A SMOK-ING PIPE.
LOOKS LIKE IT WOULD FETCH A DECENT PRICE IF SOLD.

FWOOSH
HEY!
ARE YOU LISTEN-ING TO ME?
I AM.
FWSH
AN EXPLOSION.
A FOOD STOREHOUSE.
A DROPPED SMOKING PIPE.

DOES THIS STOREHOUSE HOLD THE SAME THINGS AS THE ONE THAT BURNED DOWN?
YES.
TO MY KNOWL-EDGE, THE GOODS GET OLDER THE FARTHER IN YOU GO.
CAN I HAVE THIS?
ポン PAT
PAT ポン
SURE, I DON'T CARE.
THEN ...
...I CAN HAVE THIS AND THAT BOX TOO, RIGHT?
WHAT ARE YOU UP TO?
I'LL NEED A MALLET, A SAW, AND NAILS AS WELL.
HMMooo
JUST A TINY EXPERI-MENT.

WOW.
YOU'RE SURPRISINGLY GOOD AT THAT.
I GREW UP POOR...
...SO I'M GOOD AT MAKING STUFF I DON'T HAVE.
POP
THAT SHOULD DO IT.
...AND HE WAS ALWAYS MAKING TOOLS THAT HAD NEVER BEFORE BEEN SEEN IN OUR COUNTRY FROM MEMORY.
WHEN HE WAS YOUNGER, PA STUDIED ABROAD IN THE WEST...
DO WE?
FINALLY, I'M GOING TO PUT THAT FLOUR IN HERE.
GOT ANYTHING I CAN START A FIRE WITH?
WE CAN GET SOMETHING.
THANK YOU.

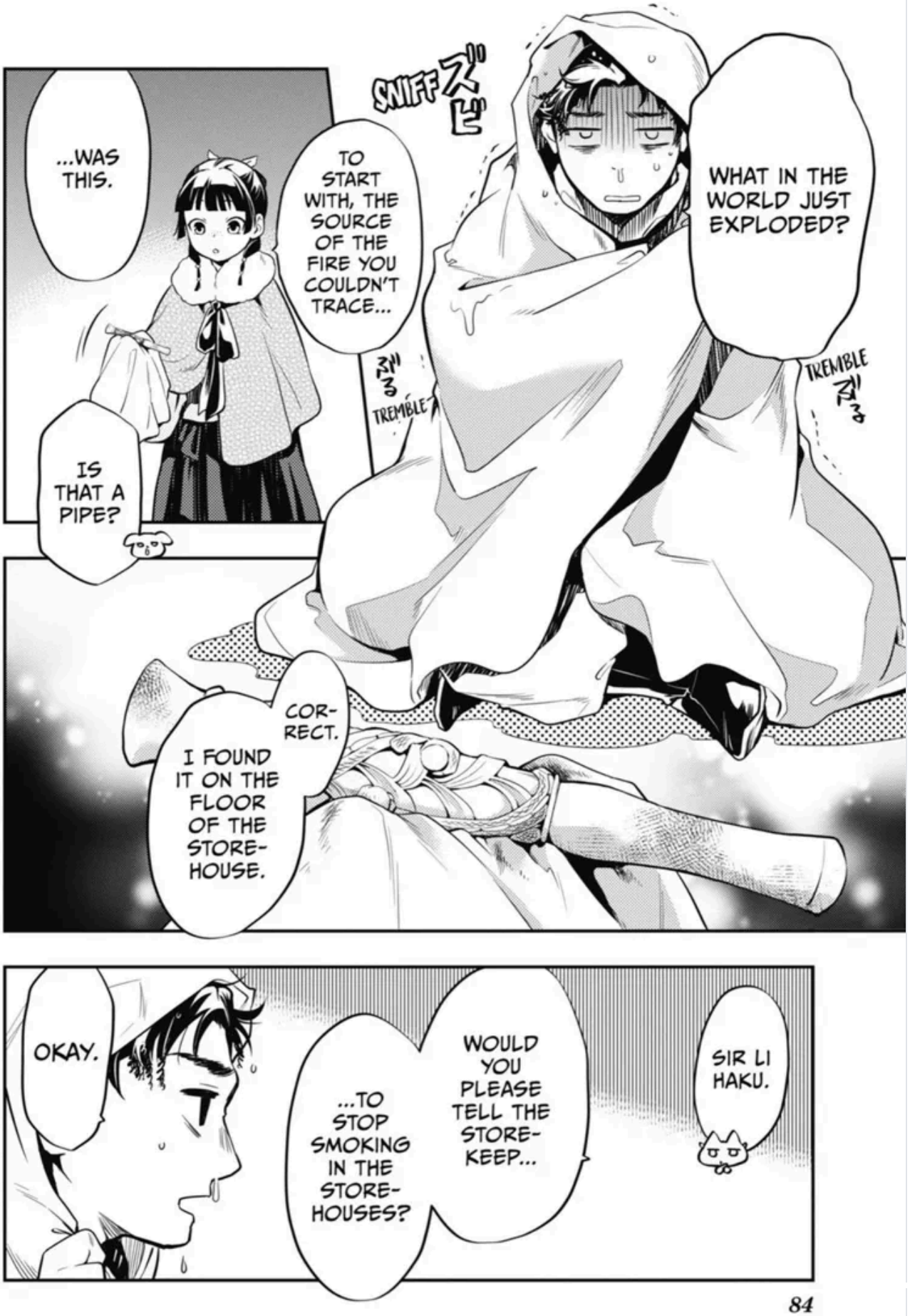
I CAN'T EVEN BEGIN TO IMAGINE WHAT SHE'S DOING.
I'M GOING TO GO DRAW WATER FROM THE WELL.
ALL DONE.
ザァァァ
NOW...
UH, OKAY.
IT'S NOT SAFE, SO PLEASE GO HIDE BEHIND THAT BUILDING.

?
SIR LI HAKU...
IT'S NOT SAFE. COULD YOU PLEASE GET BACK?
WHAT'S SO SCARY ABOUT IT?
WHAT COULD YOU POSSIBLY BE UP TO...
...THAT COULD POSE A THREAT TO A SOLDIER LIKE ME?
UGH...
FINE.

PLEASE RUN AWAY AT ONCE.
HUH?
I'M GOING TO LIGHT IT NOW.
IT'S DANGER-OUS, SO PLEASE BE VERY CAREFUL.
ZOOM
TOSS
RUN AWAY FROM WHAT?
HEY.

BOOM
WHOOOA!

FWOOSH
KRAKL
AHHHHHH!
PUT IT OUT!!
THAT'S WHY I TOLD YOU TO RUN AWAY.
SPLASH
Lやっ


SNIFF ズビ
WHAT IN THE WORLD JUST EXPLODED?
TREMBLE ブルブル
TO START WITH, THE SOURCE OF THE FIRE YOU COULDN'T TRACE...
TREMBLE ブルブル
...WAS THIS.
IS THAT A PIPE?
COR-RECT.
I FOUND IT ON THE FLOOR OF THE STORE-HOUSE.
OKAY.
...TO STOP SMOKING IN THE STORE-HOUSES?
WOULD YOU PLEASE TELL THE STORE-KEEP...
SIR LI HAKU.
84

...WAS PROBABLY THE FLOUR THAT WAS IN THERE.
ぽん PAT
THE SOURCE OF THE ACTUAL EXPLO-SION...
ぽんっ PAT
NO, IT DIDN'T.
BUT IN YOUR EXPERIMENT JUST NOW...
SO?
DID THAT PIPE EX-PLODE?
ふ FWISH
THE WHEAT FLOUR AND BUCKWHEAT FLOUR IN THE AIR...
わっ
...CAUGHT FIRE.

AND WHEN HE LIT THE PIPE...
...A GUST OF WIND FROM OUTSIDE STIRRED THE FLOUR ALOFT.
WHEN THE STOREKEEP SNUCK IN TO HAVE A SLY PUFF...
...CAUSING AN EXPLOSION.
...THE FLOUR IN THE AIR ALSO CAUGHT FIRE...
I'M AMAZED YOU FIGURED THAT OUT!
THANKS.
HUH.
BUT FROM WHAT YOU'VE TOLD ME, I BELIEVE SOMETHING LIKE THAT IS WHAT CAME TO PASS.
THIS IS JUST MY HYPOTH-ESIS, OF COURSE.
86

KABOOM
ドッカーん
EVER SINCE I BLEW UP THE ROOM I WAS STAYING IN AT VERDI-GRIS...
...I'VE HANDLED FLOUR WITH GREAT CARE.
... WHOA.
THE OLD LADY REALLY PUT THE FEAR IN ME BACK THEN.
I WAS SURE SHE WAS GOING TO HANG ME UPSIDE DOWN FROM THE TOPMOST FLOOR OF THE BUILDING.
IT'S SO STRANGE HOW FLOUR CAN EXPLODE LIKE THAT.
THERE AREN'T ANY TRULY STRANGE AND INEX-PLICABLE THINGS IN THIS WORLD.
ANYONE WHO ALREADY HAD THIS KNOWLEDGE COULD HAVE PIECED IT TOGETHER.

AUHOO!
IT JUST SO HAPPENED THAT LI HAKU DIDN'T KNOW.
TREMBLE
MOST HAPPENINGS THAT GET LABELED "BIZARRE" COME OUT OF A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE.
SIR LI HAKU...
...PLEASE TAKE CARE NOT TO CATCH A COLD.
IF YOU DO CATCH ONE, THOUGH, A MAN NAMED LUOMEN IN THE PLEASURE DISTRICT MAKES VERY EFFECTIVE MEDICINE.

THAT TOOK LONGER THAN I THOUGHT IT WOULD.
NOW, IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME, I HAVE TO GET BACK TO WORK.
IF I DON'T DO THIS MUCH, THERE'S A CHANCE HE WON'T HAVE ENOUGH MONEY FOR FOOD.
IT'S UP TO ME TO PROMOTE PA'S SERVICES SINCE HE HAS NO NOSE FOR PROFIT.
BOW ペコ
THANKS!
I RAN OFF WITH THIS BY ACCIDENT.
OOPS!

I THINK I CAN RESTORE IT IF I CLEAN IT UP A LITTLE AND ADD A MOUTHPIECE.
BUT STILL...
...THIS IS FAR TOO WELL-CRAFTED FOR A MERE STOREKEEP TO OWN.

MAYBE IT'S TERRIBLY PRECIOUS TO HIM.

I GUESS I'LL POLISH IT AND GIVE IT BACK.